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Marketing

MARKETING RESOURCE

WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT

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First things first: you need a website. Maybe you just started a business from scratch, or maybe your business has been around for a long time and you haven't gotten to building one yet.

But we live in an increasingly digital world, and the consumers of the 21st century are better informed than ever before. [According to AdWeek, 81% of consumers conduct some level of research online before making a purchase, and chances are that your competitors have websites too](#).

A dedicated website is how you control your story, your image, and your message, keeping your customers informed and letting them speak for you.

No matter what business you're in, your website will bring in customers, dollars, and success.

In this article, we'll talk about where to begin. We'll explore some critical pieces that you'll need in your website, like optimization, SEO, design, and blogging.

You might have the savvy and the personnel to code your own site or you might be looking for someone to build it for you, but either way, it's important to know what you're looking for. This article will empower you to know what you want and ask for exactly what you need.

CUSTOM-BUILT SITES VS. THEMES

There's no denying that the fastest way to launch a website is to buy a domain name and set up a site with a preset theme. Sites like WordPress offer a marketplace of themes to choose from, from free, basic themes to complex ones that cost hundreds of dollars.

There are also services available like Wix or Squarespace that provide you both the template and the ability to edit parts within the template with little to no coding ability.

The Problem With Pre-Made Themes

The problem with templates is that they're not custom. Lots of them come with built-in features to grant you additional customization, but those features will ultimately weigh down the site and slow loading times. You might have to put up with features and design elements that don't fit your business.

Another downside to using templates is that there might be lots of other sites out there using default, easy templates. Your site will blend in to the crowd, and that's bad for business.

You probably won't be able to customize the site as much as you might like. What you see is what you get, and making alterations risks breaking key features, since you don't know what's going on behind the scenes. Most importantly, you don't control a template. The developer can make changes or updates that you don't like, and you won't have any power to stop them. Worse still, the developer might abandon support for the theme entirely.

Custom Websites: Worth The Money

If you hire a professional team to build your site, you can dictate every pixel of the site to your exact needs. You can still model the site off of a theme that you like or another site, but with any alterations you want.

You won't be wasting precious loading time on background features you're not even using, and you can emphasize whatever features or sections are most important for your business.

You know the site will be tested across all operating systems and browsers, and it will be adaptive to viewers on mobile, an increasingly large segment of web traffic. And if something breaks in a new browser or on a new device, you'll have the support you need to fix it.

Most importantly, a custom site is future-proof. Since you have a web development team doing continuous support, you can add or remove features as the needs of your business and customers change. You don't run the risk of managing an obsolete site just because the developer that built your template decided not to update it.

Custom Site Basics

A good website is the foundation of your brand's presence online — all your other online marketing efforts, from email to social media, will eventually lead back to your website. It's available around the clock to visitors, leads, and customers who might need help or information.

Your website isn't just a brochure. In the inbound marketing methodology, you want to establish yourself as an authority in your business, answering questions, solving problems, and guiding visitors toward a purchasing decision. If your site is flooded with coupons, flashy graphics, and popups, you're not accomplishing that.

Additionally, your website needs to be adaptable to change. Ideally, your developers will set you up with a backend like Wordpress that's easy to edit, even for non-coding savvy members of your staff. You don't want to be waiting around for a developer to make minor edits like publishing blog posts or changing front-page graphics.

46% of users will not return to a poorly performing website.

You have 5 seconds to engage a customer before they leave your website.

C H A P T E R   2
FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS

The Need For Speed

When it comes to websites, speed is paramount. [47% of visitors expect a website to load in less than two seconds](#), and 40% of them will leave if the website takes more than three seconds to load. It doesn't matter how good your content is if no one's reading it, and your visitors aren't going to wait around at your door for your content to load.

When Tagman studied the effects of loading speed on customer conversion rates, they found that every one-second delay in loading speed caused a 7% loss in conversions, 11% fewer views, and a 16% decrease in customer satisfaction. Those are customer dollars you can't afford to lose.

Putting The Pedal To The Metal

So you have a speed problem. What do you do about it?

The first thing is to minimize HTTP requests. According to Yahoo, [80% of a website's load time](#) is spent on downloading the different parts of the page — images, style sheets, and scripts. The more behind-the-scenes software you have running on your site, the longer it's going to take to load.

Another place you can cut loading times is with professional hosting. All your site assets have to be hosted on a server (or several) somewhere, and the connection speed of that server will have a profound effect on the speed at which your website loads.

It's tempting, especially when you're small, to avoid subscription fees by hosting your site yourself, but you probably can't match the connections speeds of professional hosting services without spending way too much on hardware to be worth the expense.

A third factor is code minification, also known as code minimization. Since your site has to load code, and code is made of text, trimming the text of your code without sacrificing functionality will boost load times substantially.

Most JavaScript and CSS files that get implemented on custom websites are written for the developer's convenience, which means they're packed with whitespace, comments, long variable names, and other practices that focus on readability over brevity.

If you think minification sounds too complicated for the average site owner, you're right! The ability to make granular code changes to shorten code and increase loading speeds is another advantage that a professional dev team brings to the table.

Take a look at your images. Have you ever uploaded an image to WordPress and noticed the message "crunching"? Image crunching is the process of making several copies of an image so that the one loaded on a given page isn't any bigger and data-heavy than it has to be.

It's also worth taking a look at whether the images need to be there at all. Cascading style sheets (CSS) can create hundreds of effects — color, opacity, blur, gradients, shadows — that resolve sharply and quickly at any screen size, and will load in a fraction of the time. Use CSS effects wherever possible in lieu of additional imagery.

CHAPTER 3
SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a big, scary concept, and there aren't enough hours in the day to keep up with the number of articles being written on the subject.

But don't worry! At its core, it's a pretty simple idea — you're trying to

make it easier for Google to crawl and index your site and see if it can answer the searcher's question.

From a web development perspective, there are several tricks and tools to keep in mind.

Redirect Your URLs Intelligently

If you have to move or change a page, you don't want to lose all your hard-earned SEO to that page, nor do you want to have to start linking from scratch. A 301 redirect is a permanent redirect that passes upwards of 90% of Google's ranking power to the newly redirected page. Using redirects is a good way to update and adapt your site without resetting your link equity every time you move a page or update a URL.

The New World Of Keywords

For years, on-site SEO was all about keywords. Every keyword that seemed relevant, plastered all over the title, headers, tags, even hidden in the code. Luckily for us (and our users), that's no longer the case. Google got wise to pages that were packed with more keywords than content and adjusted their algorithms accordingly.

That's not to say that keywords aren't important — they still are — but now it's all about using them judiciously, intelligently, and naturally. Keywords should be placed in the title of pages and blog posts so that they show up in search results.

In inline content like pillar pages and blog posts, make use of HTML H1 and H2 tags to divide up sections, and use keywords in those section headers. Don't just format them differently with bold fonts and colors — Google will read them as one big block of text and the keywords in your headers won't stand out.

Also remember to use different variations and permutations of keywords that mimic real conversations and colloquialisms. Google is putting more and more emphasis on so-called conversational search, where people phrase their search queries like real questions. Phrasing

your content to match will help you connect with potential customers more naturally.

Finally, make sure your images have alt text and alt tags that incorporate keywords and specifically relate to the image or graphic in question — not just "blog-image-2." That way, search engines can crawl your images as well as your text, and if your readers can't see the image for some reason, they'll at least have some context for what it is.

What's Structured Data and How Should You Use It?

"Structured data" as a general term is basically what it sounds like — data that's been organized in some way. For example, if instead of writing "meet with Chris for coffee at Starbucks at noon," you made a table with entries for who you were meeting with, where, and when, you'd be structuring the data.

In web development terms, structured data refers to organizing data according to a [standardized list of attributes called Schema. org that Google, Bing, Yahoo!, and Yandex agreed to support in 2011](). Unfortunately, there's been a lot of confusion about structured data and, as a result, [a survey by Bing found that only 17% of websites are actually using the Schema.org markup system]().

Structured data can be used a lot of different ways, like specifying the difference between a title and a description. Doing so will allow search engines to know not only the contents of the data they scrape, but what that data actually is. Google and other search engines prioritize sites that use structured data, so it benefits you to implement it where you can.

Some of the benefits include rich search results — the well-formatted panes that show up in search engines with images, styling, and other enhancements — rich cards, knowledge graphs, breadcrumbs in search results, and several others.

We won't get into a lot of detail about how exactly to code and implement structured data, but suffice it to say that it can substantially uplift your SEO. Talk to your dev team about getting structured data set

up as soon as you can.

Optimize Your Title Tags

Title tags are extremely important, especially if you're regularly publishing new content like a blog. A title tag is an HTML element that specifies the title of a web page. Keep in mind that your title tag doesn't necessarily have to be the same as the visible title on the published post, though it's usually easier to have them match.
Ideally, your title will be around 50-60 characters long — long enough to get your keywords in and show readers what they're seeing, but not so long that it gets cropped by search results pages. Google crops search results by pixel width, not characters, [but according to Moz.com, 90% of titles under 60 characters will be displayed in full](#).

Title tags are used in three places: search results, browsers, and social networks. Your title tag will determine the header in your search engine result pages, and can be the single biggest factor in whether someone clicks on your link.

Most social networks — Facebook and Twitter included — will also use the title tag to determine what to display when someone shares your article. Keep in mind that both Facebook and Twitter also have their own meta tags — custom pieces of code that don't display on your site — that allow you to specify a different title in the link than on your site.

Use major keywords toward the front of your title, but don't overstuff the title with keywords. There's no Google penalty for titling an article "Good SEO, SEO Tips, Best SEO Practices," but it doesn't look natural and users don't like it.

Finally, make sure that every single page on your site has a unique title. This will help search engines know that your content is unique. It might seem difficult to generate thousands of blog posts without repeating yourself, but lots of templates will help you avoid repeating yourself. You should also avoid simple titles like "Home" and "Contact" — add in your brand name or site name to distinguish yourself from the other home pages on the web.

Content is King

[The first thing is to make sure your content isn't too "thin."](#) The basic definition of thin content is a page that has little or no original content, either because there's not enough content or because the content is redundant.

And don't think you can avoid a thin content from Google by pasting in duplicate content from other pages on your site — Google can see right through that tactic, and will punish domains that try to rank higher by showing scraped or copied-and-pasted pages that don't add anything of value to users.

It's not enough to meet your character counts, though. To maximize your SEO, you need to demonstrate your authority on your subject. Google wants to show its users the most useful results it can, so if you can show Google that you're able to answer questions better than similar sites, your rankings will rise.

So how do you do that? Use plenty of links when you cite specific data — the sites you link to will boost your standing in search results and vice versa.

Focus your attention on a particular topic — it might be tempting to write about popular or topical things that don't relate directly to your business in an effort to attract more traffic, but visitors to your site who aren't interested in your business aren't worth attracting in the first place.

Write detailed, long-form copy on certain topics — these "pillar pages" will make you a one-stop shop for the information that your customers need and want.

And finally, make sure your writing is mistake-free. Everyone makes the occasional typo, but you should put concerted effort into making sure that your writing is grammatically correct, spelled correctly, and internally consistent. Use tools like [Grammarly](#) or [Hemingway](#) to check your writing for stylistic problems, though keep in mind that you don't have to take every suggestion they give.

Don't Sleep on Mobile

[Your SEO isn't complete unless you're ready for mobile browsing](#). With Google's new "mobile-first" indexing came a lot of confusion about what the average site owner needed to change and how much.

The difference is that [Google will now crawl your mobile website first](#) and determine your page rankings accordingly for both mobile and desktop. If you don't have a mobile site, your desktop site will be crawled and ranked the same as it was before. But if you do have a mobile site, it needs to be a good one.

Luckily, most modern web templates are adaptive by design, but if you're using a custom-built site (as we recommend), you'll have to make sure your development team builds your site for mobile as well as desktop.

Make sure your page width changes properly, your image assets are crunched for smaller screens, and your load times are fast. Try not to rely too heavily on desktop-specific design features — create mobile versions or don't load them at all.

Don't forget to register your site with Google Search Console and submit your sitemap for indexing. This will allow you to see if indexing is working properly on all your pages and make sure that Google is indexing your site well.

C H A P T E R   4
DESIGN

The design and layout of your site can be a make-or-break factor in retaining traffic and getting visitors to come back and visit you again in future.

The basic goal of design is to make sure that your visitors can find the information they want quickly and easily. Let's talk about how to do that.

Think Like A User

Why are your users on your site in the first place? Are they looking to make a purchase or just gather information? How tech-savvy are they? Think about how a potential customer or client is likely to navigate a site in your industry and build around that.

What do your visitors search for? Google Analytics, as well as some hosting services like WordPress, will let you see which search terms are driving people to your page. They may not be what you originally thought! Look into what aspects of your site are being prioritized and rearrange them accordingly.

You can also learn from your competitors. Visit their sites and see how hard it is to get where you want to go. Can you easily find their blog? Their contact info? How many clicks does it take to make a purchase? Take notes on what you like and don't like about their sites and incorporate those lessons into your own.

Web Design Tips To Keep In Mind

Make everything accessible within three clicks. The so-called "Three-Click Rule" isn't a hard and fast rule of web design — if you run an e-commerce site with thousands of SKUs, you'll probably want to build things into hierarchies that might take more than three clicks to get through — but it's an important principle to keep in mind. Don't bury important information.

You'll see some sites that structure information as slideshows or split blogs into individual pages to rack up more pageviews as users are forced to click through. Don't do that. It's annoying, overly complex, and Google isn't fooled by artificially inflated numbers. Use tabs, headers,

footers, and dropdown menus judiciously to make all your important information easy to find.

Don't put too much on one page. Remember, web users are impatient and spoiled for choice. If they can't find what they're looking for on your page, they'll go back to their search results and try someone else. Overcrowding a page with links, graphics, banners, CTAs, and other content is a surefire way to frustrate visitors.

Make navigation easy. This ties into the previous two tips, but it's worth mentioning. Use hierarchical design to guide visitors where they want to go. Different sizes, colors, and layouts will naturally lead the visitors' eyes to certain areas of the screen, and you want to take advantage of that. It shouldn't take more than five seconds for a user to find the link or info they're looking for.

Design and Layout Rules To Follow

First, a few basic rules. These may seem obvious, but lots of sites don't follow them.

Make sure your images are optimized for the frame they're placed in. Too small and they'll be grainy and pixelated, too large and they'll increase load times. Use consistent image sizes across your site to streamline image crunching.

Text shouldn't bleed off the page. Scrolling sideways, depending on the device your visitors are using, is annoying at best and impossible at worst. Text should be kept in a tidy column in the center of the page, [ideally no more than 700 pixels or so wide](#).

Leave plenty of space between elements on the page. Clustering things too close to the edges of the page or to each other is visually confusing and distracting to look at.

Make sure your design and branding are consistent across the site. If your business lives mostly online, pick a web font — there are thousands to choose from — and use it consistently on all written materials. Keep your voice and tone in mind at all times, and establish rules for which

colors and logos should be used in which situations.

Drawing the Eye

When people read or browse a site, they tend to move their eyes in a zig-zag pattern from left to right, then down and left, then left to right again — just like reading lines of text. The elements of your site should be arranged to follow that pattern. For example, your logo should be in the upper left side of the page in order to be the first thing the user sees. Action buttons should be at the bottom right of text boxes like surveys or contact forms.

We also tend to notice bigger things first. Size your page elements to draw attention to important features first, then less important ones. The goal is to direct your visitors eyes to the information that's most useful to them.

Ultimately, the easier your site is to navigate, the more visitors will use it and the more future clicks you'll get. If you're having trouble figuring out where to start, tools like VWO can analyze your site and how people use it and help you optimize accordingly.

Lead Visitors Down The Sales Funnel

Your overarching goal is to eventually convert visitors to customers, and the design of your website should be in service of that goal.

Your CTAs should be above the fold — visible on your page without scrolling. In a world where people browse on any number of different devices, screen sizes, and aspect ratios, the "fold" is a moving target, but the idea is not to bury your CTA so far down that visitors might not run across it.

Remember to lead visitors, don't push them. Nothing turns off a potential customer like a pushy salesperson, so don't jump right in and try to get visitors to book a meeting or give you their information. Place your CTAs strategically — "Get my free ebook" in the middle of a blog post or "Get a quote today" on your pricing page — so that you know the people

reading the CTA are already interested.

CHAPTER 5
GROWTH DRIVEN DESIGN

Growth-driven design is a new trend in web design and development, but we think it may well be here to stay. The idea is simple but sometimes controversial: that your website should be launched before it's complete.

We know, that sounds crazy, but that's the problem with web development today. It takes too long, it's based on little to no usage data, and it relies on investing huge amounts of time and money into a set of pages and resources that you don't even know if you need. Even worse, once your website is finished, you spent so much making it that you don't want to change it.

[Growth-driven design flips that model on its head](). Instead, you launch a website quickly and relatively inexpensively, with a minimum of the features and pages it needs to get the job done. We're talking six weeks, not six months. As your users start to interact with the site, you can tell what they like and what they don't like. You can learn what new features they'll want and which ones they can do without.

Over time, you can adapt your site to exactly match the needs of your users. Instead of paying one lump sum for a big, finished website that might not even work that well, you're paying for constant adaptation and evolution to ensure that your site stays current and relevant. It's a tough idea to wrap your head around, but it might be the next step in web development.

CHAPTER 6
INBOUND STRATEGY AND YOUR WEBSITE

[Your website is the cornerstone of your inbound marketing strategy](). All your online endeavors — advertising, sales, customer acquisition, customer retention, etc. — will lead back through it. If your website doesn't look the part, your marketing efforts will be wasted and your

sales will suffer.

Blogging is by far the most useful tool at your disposal to keep your site high in the search rankings. It helps you build authority, establish yourself as a reliable source of useful information, and become a go-to for future searches. Use links, keywords, and consistent content to elevate your standing in visitors' minds.

More is better. According to one study by Hubspot, B2B companies that post 16 or more blog posts a month [receive nearly four times the traffic](#) of companies that post four or fewer times a month. The numbers are similar for B2C companies.

But it's about quality, not just quantity — another study indicated that [75% of blog views were on older posts](#). If your content is useful, it will continue to generate traffic fo you long after it first goes live.

Your social media strategy will vary depending on the nature of your company and the goals you're trying to accomplish, but all of it is coming back to your website sooner or later. If your site isn't the best it can be, all those efforts are wasted.

The same goes for email marketing. Your goal with quality email marketing is to use snappy, catchy subject lines to encourage clicks and then to use graphics, copy, and well-placed CTAs to drive readers … right back to your site! Again, if your site doesn't look the part, what was the point?

CHAPTER 7
YOUR WEBSITE IS MORE THAN JUST A WEBSITE

If you get everything we've discussed above working in sync, you're guaranteed to see results. And even though your website is the central piece of your marketing strategy, it has another role: telling your story.

Consistent branding is vital to business success — check out our "Principles of Branding" pillar piece to learn more — and as such, every piece of your marketing, from business cards to logos to the signature on your email, should be an extension of your brand.

Your website is an interactive, living opportunity to extend your brand to every corner of the internet — as well as a place for it to live. The fact is, when you spread your message through Facebook, Twitter, email, or anywhere else, you're stuck trying to shoehorn your brand into their formats, fonts, and layouts. On your website, you can express your brand identity exactly how you want to.

In addition to being a home for your brand identity, your website is one of the few spots on the web that you control. **You can send the exact messaging you want, whether it's through high-quality video, long-form content, breaking news, user testimonials, or reviews from other sites**.
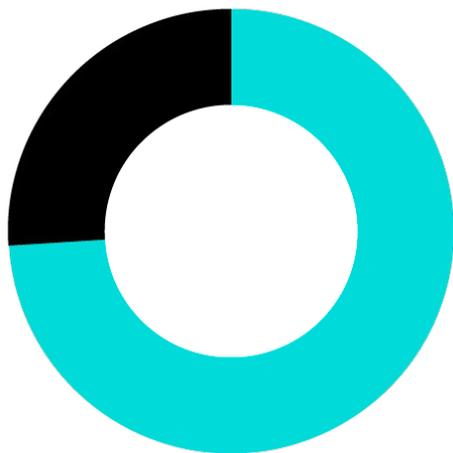
74% of users will abandon after waiting 5 seconds for a mobile site to load.

2 SECONDS

Peak load time for conversions.

Take advantage of your virtual soapbox to show the world exactly what you want them to know about you.

They say "show, don't tell." But sometimes you need to tell, and sometimes that's exactly what your customers want. Especially if your product is complex or your business operates in a new space, people are going to want to educate themselves about you. Your site is the perfect opportunity to communicate everything about you to a curious world. This is your virtual handshake — make the most of it.

C H A P T E R 8
IS IT WORKING

So you've done your research, put in the time, hired the right people, and optimized everything you could think to optimize to build the perfect website for your business and your brand. But does it work?

The easiest thing to do is to test it yourself! Browse around your site, refreshing pages, signing up for email newsletters, adding things to your cart, reading articles, clicking links, and everything else you expect your visitors to be doing. No one knows better than you how the site is supposed to be working, so you're more likely to catch bugs and tweaks than anyone else.

For a more data-driven approach, test your site's performance with tools like Pingdom or Hubspot's Website Grader. They'll tell you how fast your site is loading, where problems might lie, and how to fix them.

Check your rankings. Use sites like Alexa or Google Analytics to see if you're moving up the page on search results, both in general and for specific keywords. Do some searches yourself — either use Incognito Mode or clear your cache to avoid biasing the results — and see if you're showing up on the first page of Google results. Try searching for both your site itself and for specific search terms that you think your potential customers are using.

Are you getting more conversion? You should be able to check older data to compare your pre-optimization site to your fully optimized one. Are more people clicking through to your site from search results? From

social media? Are people signing up for more information? Are they clicking CTAs?

See how people are using the site, too. Your bounce rate — the percentage of people who visit one page and then leave — is a good indicator of how well you're enticing people to stick around and learn more about you. For more detail, use a site like Hotjar to see where people visit, where they click, where they linger, and where they move on. Check your analytics to see how many pages people are viewing and how long they're spending on the site.

And finally, never stop improving! In this day and age, you have constant access to the stats you need to tell you what people like about your site and what they don't, and you can make changes quickly and easily. If new forms of media arise that you want to take advantage of, you can! Browsing habits, devices, and customers are in constant flux, but if you pay attention, you'll be able to keep pace for as long as you're in business.